

In May the UK's biggest cities will vote on whether to directly elect mayors. The Warwick Commission investigates existing experience, both in Britain and overseas

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*The government is requiring that voters in all major English cities decide in May 2012 whether they want to bring in elected executive Mayors (on the London model). To shed light on the wider debates a Warwick University Commission headed by **Professor Wyn Grant** has been investigating existing experience, both in Britain and overseas.*



Are the public confused about the degree of power that elected mayors would be given if the government proposals are accepted in local referendums? Will big city voters in the 10 cities that are due to go to referendum on 3 May understand exactly what they are voting for? Some critics argue that due to the very fact of electing mayors, the electorate may expect them to be able to accomplish more in improving their cities than they are actually able to.

To shed light on these issues the [Warwick Commission](#) on elected mayors has conducted around 35 interviews over the last three months with existing directly elected mayors in England (Leicester and 9 other towns), along with the council leaders of the 10 major cities that will hold referendums on changing over in May. We also interviewed directly elected mayors from Canada and New Zealand, senior officers from Australia and England, and MPs and councilors in the UK. As set out in [an earlier blog](#), our research ensures that opinions and narratives were heard from both sides; those who are in favour of the directly elected mayoral model as well as those opposed.

In terms of political allegiances, there appears to be no real distinction between the UK political parties as to which party is in favour or which is opposed to directly elected mayors. Those local leaders who are opposed to change seem to believe that the referendum in May will predominantly yield 'No' results. Yet a recent [referendum in Salford](#) resulted in a Yes vote for a Mayor – who will now consequently be elected in May. This vote under earlier legislation was triggered by a petition initially organized by the English Democrat Party (normally very much a fringe party, but who secured 10,500 local signatures) and was backed by local Tories and Liberal Democrats, and opposed by the local majority Labour council group.

However, the Salford result was on a very low turnout, so it will be interesting to see which way the public actually votes elsewhere in England. Meanwhile, Leicester already has a 'City Mayor' under other legislation and Liverpool voters too will choose a new Mayor on 3 May after the city council used their powers to create the post without holding a referendum.

During our elite interviews there were mixed opinions over whether the public is well informed about the referendum. Some city leaders believe that the public is confused between the honorific Lord Mayor/Civic Mayor role and the idea of an elected executive Mayor. They feel that voters think they will be voting for their 'mayor in chains' and not a 'leader'. Other leaders interviewed say that the public do know the difference: 'They are not daft!'

The powers of elected Mayors

All the elected mayors in New Zealand and Canada we interviewed said clearly that if a leader is voted for by the public then voters will expect that the person elected will have the powers to make a difference and to implement change in improving affairs in their city. There are reviews underway in both countries in 2012 to look into further into the powers that their Mayors have.

This issue has also been a major part of the discussions with mayors and council leaders here in England. The government's [Consultation paper](#) was quite vague in the area of 'powers'. Basically it allows an elected mayor to choose their own powers once they are elected, by submitting a proposal to the central government for the Secretary of State to accept (or not). This hardly seems clear enough. If voters are to be well informed when casting their vote in the upcoming referendum, the 'powers' of directly elected mayors needs to be made much clearer.

The quality of local democracy

Our central question to all those we spoke with was whether directly electing mayors constitutes an advance for democracy over indirect elections or the existing 'submerged executive' model – where voters choose councilors, and the majority party (or the majority coalition of parties) within the council later choose who should lead them. Should the local political leader be publicly elected, or instead politically elected through their party only after voters have spoken.

This is an important question, and in New Zealand and Canada, their mayors believe that direct democracy is definitively more democratic from a citizen's perspective. It provides the public and city with a voice; they have directly chosen a person that they wish to represent them. This makes the mayoral role more transparent and accountable. Elected mayors in England all feel similarly about the virtues of directly electing local leaders.

However, the opponents of changing the status quo strongly argue that an elected council is more democratic and diverse. Restricting the focus of elections mainly to one person in fact works against democracy. 'What if the electorate vote in the wrong person?', they ask. But as one New Zealander mayor put it: 'At the end of the day, if the public wants that person, then so be it. It is up to the public to decide.'

The [Commission for Elected Mayors](#) is chaired by [Professor Wyn Grant](#), Professor of Politics in the Department of Politics and International Studies at Warwick, and its director is [Professor Keith Grint](#), professor of Public Leadership and Management at Warwick Business School (WBS).

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About the author

Professor Wyn Grant is a senior tutor of the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick. In 2010 he was presented with the Diamond Jubilee Lifetime Achievement award of the Political Studies Association of the UK at their Awards Ceremony. He was elected an Academician of the Academy of Social Sciences in 2011. His most recent book is (co-edited with Arne Niemann and Borja García) '[The transformation of European football: Towards the Europeanisation of the national game](#)' (Manchester University Press, 2011).

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